Chapter 19

Reinventing Conservation: A Practitioner's View

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"Timing is everything," says an old adage. From the perspective of conservation practice, it is a particularly important time to step back, reflect on recent trends, and begin to describe a new vision of conservation for the twenty-first century. The transition between centuries is a time of change and shifting paradigms. It is a time of tension between the old and new, the perceived and the imagined, wilderness and stewardship. It is also a time of confluence, of tributaries joining and widening, swelling into a broad stream and making connections with a broader landscape—the re-envisioned landscape of conservation. There are shifts in understanding and perception, in scholarship and practice, and among the larger public. This is also a time of challenge—but, more important, a time of opportunity—as conservation stewardship evolves from a historical emphasis on objectives dealing with efficiency, development of material resources, and preservation of selected wildlands, to an emphasis on objectives more closely tied to public amenity, quality of life, social equity, and civil society. There is also a concurrent devolution of centralized decision making, led by government, to a more pluralistic, community-based process, driven by private or multi-sector initiatives. This chapter explores these recent trends and examples of successful conservation practice and offers fundamental principles for reconstructing conservation in the twenty-first century.

Ways of Working: Contemporary Trends in Conservation Practice

As conservation objectives have diversified and become embedded in a broader vision of sustainability, the nature of conservation work has changed. Participation in conservation is far more inclusive, being accomplished in new ways by new constituencies and collaboration across many sectors of society. The following list of trends is not intended to be comprehensive but provides examples of how conservation work is changing in fundamental ways.

Coalitions of Diverse Interests

Writer Rick Bass describes his neighbors on the Yaak Valley Forest Council in northwestern Montana as "hunting and fishing guides, bartenders, massage therapists, road builders, heavy construction operators, writers, seamstresses, painters, construction workers, nurses, teachers, loggers, photographers, electricians and carpenters."[1] Whereas once the diverse coalition working in the Yaak Valley was an unusual phenomenon, diversity is now more a rule than an exception. Community leaders don't want to choose between a healthy economy, culture, and environment—they want it all. The diverse coalitions that have formed reflect all the interests of society. Groups such as the United Auto Workers and the Delaware Nature Education Society are supporting the protection of the White Clay Creek watershed. In northern Virginia, the Arlington County Democratic Committee, patients from a Fairfax County hospital, and the Greater Washington chapter of the Jimmy Buffett "Parrot Heads" are cleaning up the Potomac River. Across the country, these diverse conservation networks are stepping forward to shape the future of their communities and the landscapes that surround them.

Local Initiatives for Quality of Life

Stuart Cowan and Sim Van der Ryn wrote in *Ecological Design,* "Everyone is a participant and a designer!"[2] More than in the past, people want to be involved in conservation efforts. "Don't do it to us. Don't do it for us. Do it with us" is a request that is heard over and over in communities across the land. More important, community leaders, such as those in Cape Charles, Virginia, are working with interdisciplinary teams of experts and conservation service providers to design sustainable strategies for the future.

The desire to conserve important values and have natural or cultural park-like qualities in all our communities—not just in Yellowstone Na-

tional Park or the Everglades—seems to have converged with the nation's rediscovery of democracy. Quality of life has increasingly become an issue in the United States, and people realize that government alone is not capable of maintaining or restoring communities and landscapes, nor is it the appropriate force to attempt to do so.

Motivated by aspirations for a high quality of life and the realization that people can—and need to—influence their future, groups and individuals have taken responsibility for conservation efforts in huge numbers. Local initiative, occasionally in partnership with government, has taken the form of land trusts, small watershed associations, greenway and trail groups, friends of parks, "Main Street" organizations, and heritage area coalitions. These organizations have taken a hands-on approach to craft conservation plans and work to carry out specific actions, with a level of sophistication normally found only in consulting firms and government agencies.

Democracy and Civic Dialogue

Author and essayist John Elder wrote, "We must pursue stewardship not simply as the maintenance of valuable resources but also as a way of fostering a broader experience of democracy and community."[3] Certainly, the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 and the National Historic Preservation Act in 1966 forever changed the landscape of public dialogue in environmental and historic preservation decision making. These landmark laws and many state and local derivatives vastly expanded opportunities for greater inclusiveness and public participation.

More recently, the concept of conservation as a "big tent" continues to broaden as the reach is increasing with the level of public engagement. The focus of conservation has also been extended beyond a traditional emphasis on natural resource issues such as air and water pollution so that the public environmental agenda embraces an expanding list of "quality of life" issues, including public health, sustainable practices, smart growth, energy conservation, public transportation, environmental justice, and cultural heritage.

In her landmark book *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History,* Dolores Hayden explores places associated with history of women and people of color, illustrating the loss of many and the lack of value given to those that remain in our public memory. Hayden speaks of "memory rooted in places" and how "new kinds of professional roles and public processes may broaden the practice of public history, architectural preservation, environmental protection, and commemorative public art, when these are perceived as parts of wider urban landscape."[4]

Exploration of public history and memory is also opening up new venues for civic dialogue and making those conversations more inclusive. Several recent additions to the National Park System serve as illustrations, including Cane River Creole National Historical Park and its plantation slave quarters; Central High School National Historic Site in Little Rock, Arkansas; and Manzanar National Historic Site, the World War II internment camp for Japanese American citizens. "Our goal," wrote Dwight T. Pitcaithley, chief historian of the National Park Service, "is . . . understanding who we are, where we have been, and how we as a society, might approach the future. This collection of special places also allows us to examine our past—the contested along with the comfortable, the complex along with the simple, the controversial along with the inspirational."[5]

Recognition of Cultural Landscapes

Since the 1990s, recognition of the heritage value of cultural landscapes has grown in the United States and in other countries.[6] Adrian Phillips, former chair of the World Conservation Union's (IUCN's) World Commission on Protected Areas, called for "conservationists in many countries to focus their attention on . . . those inhabited landscapes where nature and culture are in some kind of balance [and where] talk of sustainable development can be more than rhetoric."[7]

Since the 1920s, the fields of cultural geography and, more recently, historic preservation, environmental history, and conservation biology have contributed to the concept of cultural landscapes.[8] This concept gives value and legitimacy to peopled places, a fundamentally different perspective from nature conservation's traditional focus on wild areas and historic preservation's focus on the built environment.

Cultural landscapes have value because they reflect history, beliefs, and ways of life. Consequently, traditional land use and associated management systems, as well as intangible cultural heritage, are given greater attention. In addition, a recent study of European landscapes documented examples of how humanized landscapes with traditions sustained over centuries have created environments rich in biodiversity.

Cultural landscapes are often large in scale and involve traditional management systems and multiple ownership. As such, they require conservation strategies that are locally based and work across boundaries, respect

cultural and religious traditions and historical roots as well as ecological systems, and focus on sustainable economies.[9]

Measurement of Conservation Success

Robert Putnam, the widely read author of *Bowling Alone,* describes "social capital" as the "connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. . . . Civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations."[10] It would be difficult to imagine successful conservation on any level in the twenty-first century that is not in large measure dependent on such social benefits. Fortunately, conservation activities often generate their own social capital. It is seen in grassroots organizing, fundraising, meetings, and all manner of volunteer activities.

Conservation practitioners are also seeing ethical reevaluation and enrichment of personal and public life through the processes of reconnection to place, social networking, and the act of conserving. This trend not only recognizes the centrality of place in people's lives but also suggests a fundamental rethinking of how success in conservation work, particularly land conservation, is measured. Reflecting on this transition, Gus Speth, dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, said: "We broke things down to the component parts and laid out rational plans of attack, with deadlines, for tackling isolated problems. Now we know the most important resource is human motivation—hope, caring, our feelings about nature and our fellow human beings."[11]

Writer, photographer, and conservationist Peter Forbes has been an early and consistent voice for new measures of success. In a speech to a national gathering of the land trusts, he describes conservation as an engine for social cohesion:

> To save a piece of land, people rethink their future not in terms of what they could do for themselves but in terms of what they could do for others. They are building rootedness, based on their sense of service toward one another and the land. To act on such feelings is the essence of citizenship and moves us from isolation to community.[12]

"The act of conserving land," he goes on to observe, "has brought into people's moral universe a renewed sense of justice, meaning, respect, joy and love, and made people feel more complete."[13]

But there is more to this than personal self-fulfillment; it is also about community building. Land conservation and social capital are so interdependent that no action or benefit can be continued for any extended period outside the context of a healthy, stable, engaged community vested in conservation's success and continuity. Measurement of conservation's contribution to social capital is gradually becoming more sophisticated. The *Northern Forest Wealth Index,* a report of the Northern Forest Center (NFC), is one example. The NFC, a nonprofit organization established to strengthen citizen leadership and regional collaboration in the northeastern United States' Northern Forest region, based the *Wealth Index* on a community's self-assessment of core assets and values. These core assets and values, including culture, economy, educational systems, and environment, were measured to determine the overall wealth or well-being of Northern Forest communities.[14]

A Framework for Multiple Objectives

The idea of creating a framework for multi-objective planning and decision making was given national prominence in the conservation movement as a result of two somewhat parallel efforts. One effort, the Unified National Program for Floodplain Management, involved a redesign of the federal government's approach to flood loss reduction. This initiative attempted to make sense out of twenty-eight different federal agencies with forty-four different legislative authorities that were involved in flood control activity. As a result of this effort, long-term institutional, technical, and funding solutions to flood loss were created using a combination of structural and nonstructural controls.

In 1989, the second effort was led by Congressmen Joseph McDade of Pennsylvania and Morris Udall of Arizona, with the assistance of the National Park Service, in response to a growing public concern for river conservation. This initiative sought ideas and information from government and private sector leaders across the United States about ways to "recognize all of the legitimate beneficial public and private uses of river corridors and encourage coordinated decisions which result in the maximum public and private benefit with the least adverse impact on significant river values."

Although neither the floodplain management effort nor the McDade-Udall initiative met all the expectations of its supporters, both of these efforts had a major influence on conservation theory and practice. The multi-objective perspective began to be embraced by a significant part of

the river conservation community and some parts of the federal bureaucracy. Since the National Park Service played a role in the river conservation initiative, the framework was replicated in other conservation projects and programs. These two efforts also began to redefine the traditional conservation role of government and resulted in a shift from centralized federal and state activities to a more decentralized approach.

Entrepreneurial Models of Conservation Economics

Experimentation with entrepreneurial models of conservation economics is encouraging new ways of working and new relationships that cultivate a more sustainable development path. "Conservation economics," a term coined by The Nature Conservancy's Center for Compatible Economic Development, represents a broad range of ventures in different parts of the country.

For example, alternative financing mechanisms for sustainable development are being tested in places such as Virginia's Clinch River valley. The Nature Conservancy has set up a "forest bank" for owners of small private woodlands. They permanently "deposit" their timber rights in return for a guaranteed annual income based on a program of sustainable forestry and the knowledge that their woodlands, which often have been in the family for many generations, will never have to be clear-cut or liquidated to meet debts. Another example is ShoreBank Pacific, a community development bank with an environmental focus, founded as a joint venture between Shorebank Corporation of Chicago (the nation's first community development bank) and Ecotrust (a nonprofit environmental organization). The bank is set up to provide financial and advisory support to individuals and community enterprises that combine conservation and economic development. Projects such as these enhance conservation and build social capital while generating new opportunities for employment and strengthening community self-determination and confidence.

More and more ventures involve food, a cultural common denominator that can build social capital in almost every corner of the world. The Nature Conservancy, for example, is now using the World Wide Web to market "conservation beef" from conserved ranches in Montana's Madison Valley. Ecotrust, in addition to its financial ventures, also partners with local fishermen on the Columbia River to market value-added seafood with the "Fresh from Young's Bay" label, a guarantee of both high quality and ecologically sensitive fishing practices. With the advent of the "slow food"

movement, which began in Italy in the 1980s, careful stewardship and marketing of traditional food products, often cultivated or created by artisanal methods, is gaining international recognition and momentum. In many places around the world, food is bringing together people who are passionately committed to landscape and agricultural stewardship, cultural diversity and tradition, craftsmanship, public health, and general well-being—and good, healthy food.

Place-Based Education

Experts agree that a longer-range horizon for conservation change will include significant investments in schools, curricula, and lifelong learning opportunities. These investments reflect a priority on place-based education and life skills, including civic learning, service learning, and cooperative group work and problem solving. Place-based education, according to Jack Chin, codirector of the Funders' Forum on Environment and Education, "provides students with opportunities to connect with themselves, their community, and their local environment through hands-on, real-world learning experiences. This enables students to see that learning is relevant to their world, to take pride in where they live, to connect with the rest of the world, and to develop into concerned and contributing citizens."[15]

David Lacy, an archaeologist with the Green Mountain National Forest, runs a summer archaeology camp for middle-school students in Rutland, Vermont, called Relics and Ruins. Guiding students to cellar holes and remnant orchards on abandoned farmsteads with sheaths of historical maps in hand, Lacy takes a place-based approach to learning that focuses on the nature of change and its relevance for young people. "We look at artifacts and their stories but also look at the larger vision of change," says Lacy, "and the powerful influence people have had through history on land use, shaping all our landscapes, even places that today appear wild. We want students to realize that they too hold this power in their hands and they need to be very thoughtful about the change they put in motion."[16]

Cautionary Observations

Although the trends described here are generally favorable to conservation, a number of circumstances can create serious obstacles to successful conservation practice, particularly in the implementation and management of

community-based efforts. It is important to understand how these circumstances arise and their potential consequences.

Tyranny of Small Solutions

Community-based efforts by nature are focused on a local scale, independent, diverse, and, frequently, geographically random. With the ever-increasing number of relatively small public or private conservation initiatives, it is harder to predict whether these efforts are efficient and effective and will accomplish anything beyond their project boundaries.

The scattershot approach of these efforts confronts conservation leaders with a phenomenon called "the tyranny of small solutions." Community-based efforts may result in small, apparently independent conservation decisions made by individual communities, groups, and local governments that may or may not achieve a predictable or desirable outcome.

Undervaluing the Relationship between People and Their Landscape

On the whole, the trend in conservation practice is toward inclusiveness, collaboration, and the valuing of local people's knowledge and experience. However, work is still being done in which people are treated as "the problem" or, worse, either are the object of condescension or are largely circumvented in the process. Many conservation practitioners and technical experts are not adequately trained or skilled in areas such as the building and maintaining of relationships, collaborative problem solving, human ecology, and use of social science tools and analysis.

Home Rule and Fragmentation

Land-use decision making remains the responsibility of local and state governments. Home rule and private property issues have made meaningful discussions of regionwide growth and the conservation of larger landscapes extremely sensitive and often controversial. Conservation organizations and agencies are in some instances reluctant to advance, or even discuss publicly, policies and alternatives that suggest any departure from a traditional emphasis on economic development or that might be perceived as infringing on private property rights. The inability of multiple ownerships and jurisdictions to work together to define common conservation goals—such as the protection of wildlife corridors—can

result in the continued fragmentation of landscapes. Landscape fragmentation contributes to the loss of critical habitat, scenic and cultural character, and traditional land uses.

Principles for Reconstructing Conservation in the Twenty-First Century

The emergence of community-based conservation has shifted the center of gravity from top-down management strategies toward more decentralized, localized, place-based approaches. This emphasis on local solutions and place-based strategies is balanced with a greater sense of larger regional and global contexts.

Conservation practitioners are thinking at larger scales, looking at whole systems and landscapes. There is a growing emphasis on cross-boundary collaboration, interdisciplinary, and international perspectives. Conservation is often most effective when it is carried out across sectors. Today there is a more favorable environment for participatory activities and comanagement and a growing appreciation of the important role conservation can play in enhancing public life and long-term economic prosperity and sustainability.

The ethical framework for conservation is becoming more socially inclusive, focusing on broader community values and social equity. There is also a greater respect for the cultural relationships that have developed between human communities and the natural world, often based on traditional local land-use practices and a deep spiritual connection between people and place.[17]

In light of recent trends and constraints identified here, several principles emerge for reconstructing conservation in the twenty-first century. The following principles illustrate four characteristics of an evolving framework for conservation: people, dialogue, and civil society; place knowledge; leadership; and creativity.

People, Dialogue, and Civil Society

Conservation is about building and sustaining a network of relationships that creates the environment for common vision and common action. This is an inclusive process that encourages open communication and dialogue.

- *Conservation is always about people.* Conservation success is people-dependent, and the way the work is conducted is crucially important. The process needs to be fair, equitable, and open. Dialogue provides an exchange of ideas, reflecting the experience and point of view of all involved. Trust and credibility are critical and are established and maintained through actions, not just words. Successful strategies acknowledge that all conservation partners, both local and outside experts, are important. A vision for the future is built on special knowledge of the landscapes and communities.
- *Conservation requires good civics as well as good information.* The current generation of conservationists works to integrate good information with good civics. Conservation thought and practice require better understanding of the values of a community and its ecological, cultural, and economic contexts. The conservation process is locally led, open to public discourse, interdisciplinary, and inclusive. Dialogue, relying on story, skill, and experience, is used to exchange ideas and move the discussion beyond individual opinions and points of view.

  Deciding what action to take to conserve a community, a landscape, and specific sites within it requires a process—an equation—to decide what actions should be taken, why, by whom, and how. The process is consensus based, and agreement is secured both at the beginning and at every major decision point.
- *Conservation creates a framework for integrating programs, interests, and points of view.* Landscapes and the conservation business are extraordinarily complex. A framework to manage these places and activities involves cooperation with a complex array of stakeholders from all levels of government and the private sector; strong communication; the crossing of traditional areas of responsibility; respect for other values and perspectives; and the spirit of "getting to yes." Anne Swanson, Michael Haire, and Paul Schwartz, in "Chesapeake Bay: Managing an Ecosystem," wrote about the difficulties encountered in place-based efforts, including "defining management units, understanding the biological, physical, economic, and cultural factors at play, and structuring a management framework that properly integrates all the component parts."[18] Ultimately, integration of programs, interests, and points of view is essential to ensure the success of landscape conservation.

Place Knowledge

A comprehensive understanding of place requires a systems-thinking approach that probes relationships and connections. This approach considers the larger context and recognizes that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

- *Multidisciplinary approaches are used to understand landscapes and communities.* Geographic context is essential in understanding a region, watershed, or site and in gaining knowledge of the place, its inhabitants, and the area's physical, biological, and cultural history. It is essential in recognizing all environmental, community, and economic values.

  Conservationists use resource information and community visioning to answer the following "McHargian" questions for a place (e.g., a basin, physiographic region, or site): What are the environments? How did they come to be? What physical, biological, and social processes characterize them? What tendencies do they exhibit? What has been the effect of human use? What is their current status? What do we want for our future?[19]
- *Conservationists think one size larger.* Conservation leaders think one size larger than the scale at which they are working, to ensure that they understand the relationship of their actions to other values, efforts, and influences. Ecology—biological, physical, and human—demonstrates that the ecological, social, economic, and spatial context is important to consider in any conservation project or program. It's important to recognize the relationship of conservation work to the people, businesses, living resources, and values most directly affected.

Leadership

Collaborative leadership can build a common vision and sense of purpose to engage and energize communities of people to work together.

- *Conservation leadership is about collaboration.* Although most conservationists will agree that it is more important to be successful in conservation than it is to be in charge, many efforts are thwarted because of "organizational turf" and egos. Successful conservation leaders have collaborative skills, and share decision making and recognition in order to achieve positive results. Sharing conservation responsibility improves effectiveness, enhances equity, and builds organizational capacity.

- *Conservation action is never just about money.* Even though funding is typically a high priority with public and private conservation agencies and organizations, successful conservation work never depends totally on money. Whether a conservation effort succeeds always depends on whether various stakeholders can agree on what they hope to achieve together. If there is agreement on vision and on conservation action, money never seems to be a problem.

Creativity

Conservation is as much an art as a science. Effective conservation relies on imagination, resourcefulness, and adaptation to continually meet challenges in constantly changing circumstances.

- *Conservation is both design and discovery.* Each landscape, community, or site is unique, and the conservation process used to respond to an opportunity or a problem is hand-tailored to fit the unique set of circumstances. Conservation initiatives include a dynamic interplay of two salient features—a general emphasis on designed approaches and an openness to discovery—that work together to create progress.

Frances J. Seymour, director of the World Resources Institute's Institutions and Governance Program, wrote that "design" means the use of tools, templates, methods, or approaches that have been developed and proven outside a specific place and that are brought in to respond to specific concerns or issues. "Discovery" is the emergence of locally conceived and instituted actions developed to meet a particular need or demand that may have emerged or revealed itself during the conservation process.[20]

Conservation leaders who are open to the dynamic interplay of designed and discovered approaches are more effective at building on the successful traditions of a community and create more approaches to solving problems and seizing opportunities for conservation.

Conclusion

In response to nearly three decades of accelerating landscape change, disinvestment in urban areas, sprawling development, and biodiversity loss, a promising new direction in community-based conservation is emerging, based on the fundamental principles outlined here. It is important,

however, to recognize that community-based conservation work in today's world can often be difficult, complicated, and challenging. Success requires time, patience, and perseverance. There are few shortcuts or alternatives to a way of working that carefully builds and sustains long-term relationships, respects a process that is fundamentally democratic and inclusive, and is guided by sound conservation principles.

The conservation community is challenged to continuously broaden its base and encourage an ongoing dialogue among people representing a wide variety of backgrounds and interests. This dialogue can include a sharing of conservation experiences in both wildlands and urban neighborhoods; public and private lands; tangible and intangible heritage; leisure and working landscapes; and the academy and practice.

Wendell Berry wrote that "people now are living on the far side of a broken connection, and . . . this is potentially catastrophic."[21] To reach across to the far side of that broken connection, we will need to strengthen the potent ties that bind people to places, to stories, and to one another. We will also need leadership and imagination to better define a language for conservation that is more inclusive than the paradigms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We will need a conservation community that is ethical, democratic, and humanistic in the broadest sense as well as creative, entrepreneurial, and intergenerational. Conservation that both taps and invests in the next generation is conservation that will have social capital for its own sustainability.